

Thursday 7th December 2006

The thirteenth day: A bumpy ride after a smooth start

Wednesday, the thirteenth day of the Sixth Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), started out looking like it might be a lucky day for supporters of the Convention. A large number of textual changes were agreed during the morning, leaving a substantially clean draft in many sections. In the late afternoon, debate turned to the comprehensive action plan – combining elements of the proposed action plans on national implementation and on Article X – and the luck seemed to run out. After the day's informal plenaries an informal consultation session was convened to try to come to agreement on the content of the future inter-sessional process. A further informal plenary was planned to follow the evening consultation meeting but this was rescheduled for early Thursday morning. All of the day's meetings were held behind closed doors.

A new version of the draft declaration was circulated during the morning to States Parties by the President of the Review Conference, Ambassador Masood Khan (Pakistan). As with Tuesday's draft, this edition has yet further reductions of bolded text [i.e., text that has yet to be agreed] compared with the previous one.

The informal plenary meetings that are preparing the text of the final declaration started out in a relaxed manner, but by the end of the day difficulties over the combined action plans had created some tensions.

Action plans and Article X

The proposal by the President of the Review Conference for a single action plan on comprehensive implementation was the subject of vigorous debate. Some States Parties have indicated that they do not wish to see so many elements relating to Article X (which relates to peaceful uses of the biological sciences) in an action plan they saw as important for dealing with problems of national implementation. Other States Parties indicated that if Article X issues were not covered they may not see the value in an action plan on national implementation. By the evening, there did not appear to be an easy path to follow to bring these two perspectives together.

The future inter-sessional process

The list of topics proposed for discussion in the inter-sessional meetings was reduced in the text circulated by the President in the morning. Two items relating to preparedness and response, to provision of assistance in cases of alleged use, and to disease surveillance were combined into one. The item on confidence-building measures (CBMs) was removed, in part because there was some confusion as to what the meeting might do that would not be covered if this was a recurring topic. [Note: in referring to the possible recurring topics in

report #13, CBMs were accidentally not included. The full list of recurring topics is therefore: universality, national implementation, scientific and technological developments, CBMs, and coordination with other international bodies.]. This brought the total of individual meeting topics down to eight. During Wednesday, a further individual meeting topic – on terms and definitions relevant to the Convention – was removed.

Other changes

The draft declaration, which includes the article-by-article review and the decisions on action plans and implementation support, circulated on Wednesday morning contained a number of changes from the version the day before. Under Article VI, difficulties of phrasing text relating to responses and assistance in the cases of dangers posed by biological weapons possessed by States that are not party to the BTWC or by non-state actors were overcome by separating a composite text into two paragraphs. Now one paragraph deals with dangers posed by breaches of the Convention and reference to the Security Council with a second noting the intentions of many States to support each other if exposed to dangers posed by biological weapons in other circumstances.

This draft also included proposed text recognising that Iran had put forward an amendment to the BTWC on explicitly prohibiting use and requesting that States Parties convey their views on this amendment to the depositary states (Russia, UK and USA).

During Wednesday's debates, some details about the proposed Implementation Support Unit (ISU) were clarified when the Netherlands' delegation requested that the words 'in Geneva' be inserted after the words 'Department for Disarmament Affairs' within the draft declaration. For reasons not clear, the preliminary discussions on the ISU all referred to it being in Geneva, but this was not made explicit anywhere in the text. [*Note: the involvement of the Netherlands in this amendment is the clearest indicator that States do not see the formation of the ISU as a precursor to an international organization for the BTWC. The Dutch and Swiss Governments competed fiercely for the right to host the 'OPBW' – the international body that would have resulted from the protocol negotiations. It is unlikely that the Dutch would have proposed this amendment if it felt it would prejudice its chances of hosting any future OPBW alongside the OPCW in The Hague.*]

Discussions in the margin clarified some confusion between States Parties as to whether the ISU positions would be funded from UN regular budget estimates or from contributions directly levied as States Parties to the BTWC. Although the ISU staff positions are described in the draft declaration as being 'within the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs' the unit will be funded directly by BTWC States Parties and not from any UN budget.

NGO activities

Wednesday's lunchtime seminar was convened by Green Cross International to present the results of their roundtable meeting held in Geneva on 8 November entitled 'Developing a Comprehensive Biosecurity Regime'. For further information on the activities of Green Cross see <<http://www.gci.ch>>.

This is the fourteenth report from the Sixth five-yearly Review Conference for the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention which is being held from 20 November to 8 December 2006 in Geneva. The reports are prepared by Richard Guthrie on behalf of the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP).

These reports are available on the BWPP website via a page dedicated to the Review Conference – <<http://www.bwpp.org/6RevCon/6thRevConResources.html>>. Details of how to subscribe to the reports via e-mail are included there.

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